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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: OBASANJO'S THREATENED IMPEACHMENT --
WHAT IT IS ALL ABOUT

REF: ABUJA 2763

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASONS 1.5
(B) AND (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Efforts to impeach Obasanjo seem to be losing steam, but the ultimate outcome still remains uncertain. Many protagonists may not want to remove Nigeria's President from office, but rather to weaken him politically to the point that he fails to get the PDP President nomination or voluntarily withdraw from the race. While constitutional issues abound as the catalysts for current action, political machinations drive events. When pulled into state-level political disputes, Obasanjo typically stands with governors. Many National Assembly members have concluded (often correctly) that Obasanjo opposes their re-election. Somebody has to go, and political survival drives the current impeachment drama. Corruption and greed also play a huge role. Obasanjo derides Nigeria's legislators, and he has had little time for cultivating them or attending to their concerns, legitimate or otherwise. Obasanjo's foes feed legislative anger. While Obasanjo likely will keep his job, he clearly will emerge from this confrontation weakened and perhaps terminally wounded. End Summary.

2. (C) The National Assembly has chafed under Obasanjo's imperial style, resenting his ability to use Nigeria's long tradition of a strong Executive to govern essentially as he pleased without having to court their favor or pay more than cursory attention to Constitutional requirements. Obasanjo's operatives openly campaigned for the removal of Assembly leaders not to the President's liking, and they enjoyed considerable success. Most Members were prepared to ignore an overbearing Executive branch, as long as they received certain perquisites (hefty allowances, cars and Federal contracts benefiting them personally). But during late 2001 and into early 2002, Obasanjo took three critical steps that jolted the legislators. First, he refused to implement "constituency projects" of 500 million Naira per Senatorial district. Second, he launched an investigation and audit of National Assembly spending and even dared Assembly Members to publish their salaries and emoluments. Third, Obasanjo transitioned from a tendency to support governors in their frequent disputes with senators and representatives into a virtual policy of doing so. The legislators saw their chance to direct money to their campaigns and into their pockets evaporating and Obasanjo turning more to their adversaries, the already well-funded governors. It all added up to one thing in their minds: Obasanjo wanted to stop them from being re-elected. Meanwhile, Obasanjo's unsuccessful efforts to unseat Ghali Na'Abba had turned the House Speaker into an implacable foe, and the once-pliable Senate President had become bitter over Obasanjo's refusal to back him in a power struggle with the Governor of Ebonyi State.

3. (C) Across broad swaths of the North and in parts of the South, political actors dependent on Federal largesse had grown increasingly concerned about two issues. First, Obasanjo was not directing enough Federal money their way. Second, some Obasanjo associates were discussing plans for a clean sweep following the President's anticipated re-election; there would be a concerted post-election attack on crony contract awards and rent-seeking behavior. At the same time, public annoyance over Obasanjo's high-handed governing style was spreading from the legislature into society at large, unhappiness over steadily increasing prices was growing, and the

President's love of foreign travel was being ridiculed in the face of his inability to obtain debt forgiveness, the centerpiece of his foreign policy.

14. (C) Influential players and especially antagonists from the North began to urge a very willing National Assembly to challenge Obasanjo -- to force him to recognize their prerogatives and to play the corruption game as it has always been played. Having faced down all previous impeachment threats, Obasanjo did not take this one seriously, refusing a list of Assembly demands that notably included:

- Addressing a joint session of the National Assembly;
- Replacing his detested legislative liaison officers; and
- Implementing the constituency projects.

15. (C) Obasanjo soon regretted his hard line, as the calls for his impeachment grew, and his backers in the National Assembly dwindled. In recent days he has:

- Offered to address a joint session;
- Agreed to replace his combative House Liaison Officer;
- Decided to hire more liaison officers so that each of Nigeria's geo-political zones is represented;
- Submitted a supplemental 2002 budget reinstating the constituency projects;
- Given a conciliatory Independence Day speech that attributed the legislative-executive stand-off to a communications gap; and
- Submitted to the Assembly a bill that would resolve the contentious oil resource allocation dispute by eliminating the offshore/onshore dichotomy.

16. (C) Behind the scenes, Obasanjo's advisors have embarked on a campaign to convince Assembly Members from their respective states to drop from the ranks of impeachment supporters. Presumably, funds are also changing hands to get key Assembly Members to abandon the impeachment drive. The PDP National Secretariat has also been active, but its interventions have met with mixed success. Former Heads of State Gowon and Shagari and other influential individuals have been enlisted to plead for Obasanjo to be permitted to finish his term.

17. (C) From meetings with numerous players in this game, we conclude that the impetus behind the impeachment threat is weakening but that its momentum remains substantial. While the number of House Members supporting impeachment appears to have fallen from just over the required 240 to something under it, many senators and representatives will continue to press for the President's removal, not because they expect to succeed but because their own political survival depends on weakening Obasanjo to the point of becoming a political lame-duck, incapable of successfully contesting for re-election.

18. (C) One of the reasons impeachment will not succeed is that it threatens the very fabric of Nigerian politics, as well as the fragile unity of Nigerian society. The Yoruba Southwest, which voted heavily for Obasanjo's opponent and co-ethnic, Olu Falae, in 1999, is now strongly behind the President. The impeachment drive, whose symbol is Speaker Na'Abba, a Northerner from Kano, is increasingly portrayed in the Southwest as a continuation of the 1993 election annulment and Northern efforts to recapture power without having to win an election (Vice President Atiku Abubakar would be the Constitutional successor). Fred Fasehun, a leader of the militant Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) recently stated publicly that impeachment of Obasanjo was an impeachment of Nigerian democracy that could result in the disintegration of the country. Obasanjo's impeachment, Fasehun said, would shatter Nigeria's unity. While Fasehun is prone to hyperbole, the sentiment behind his statements resonates in the Yoruba Southwest and may have gotten the attention of the political elite.

19. (C) Notwithstanding, many Northern political leaders continue to express support for impeachment, and Igbos clamoring for one of their own to be President in 2003 have joined the bandwagon. But for

neither of these groups is Obasanjo's actual removal from office desirable. That would turn the Vice President, a smooth politician with plenty of money and formidable machinery into an incumbent President and complicate their calculations, which stress the importance of an "open field" for 2003. Obasanjo's opponents will likely continue to inflict non-fatal wounds, such as pushing various alternative candidates to announce campaigns, in order to keep the President off balance, under pressure and unable to regain momentum in time to win his party's nomination.

JETER